

CLAIMS

The invention is claimed as follows:

1. An information processing apparatus for managing a community that is constructed via a network, comprising:

5 a bulletin board for enabling information exchange between members of the community; and

means for making a setting as to whether only the members of the community are to be permitted to write to and/or to read from the bulletin board, or whether users other than the members are to be permitted to write to and/or read from the bulletin
10 board.

2. The information processing apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the community is formed in a shared virtual space.

15 3. The information processing apparatus according to claim 2, further comprising information storing means for storing virtual positional information of the community.

4. The information processing apparatus according to claim 3, wherein the information storing means further stores information indicating whether a setting is so
20 made that writing to the bulletin board can be performed by e-mail.

5. The information processing apparatus according to claim 4, wherein the information storing means further stores information of an image that has been set by an owner of the community and is to be shown on the bulletin board.

6. The information processing apparatus according to claim 3, wherein the information storing means further stores information relating to an entrance questionnaire to be presented to a user who wants to join the community and
5 information relating to a withdrawal questionnaire to be presented to a user who wants to withdraw from the community.

7. The information processing apparatus according to claim 1, wherein information to be shown on the bulletin board includes at least one of a community ID
10 for identification of the community, a message ID for identification of a message on the bulletin board, a time when the message was written, a user ID that is assigned to a user who wrote the message, and a message ID of another message that is included if the message is a reply to said another message.

15 8. An information processing apparatus for managing a plurality of communities in a virtual space, comprising:

first storing means for storing pieces of positional information of the respective communities in the virtual space; and

second storing means for storing information relating to bulletin boards that are
20 provided in the communities,

wherein when positional information of a newly generated community is stored in the first storing means, and wherein information relating to the newly generated community and which is to be written to bulletin boards of communities that are near

the newly generated community in the virtual space is generated and stored in the second storing means.

9. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the first
5 storing means further stores, for each of the communities, information indicating whether a setting is made so that only members of the community can perform writing to the bulletin board and information indicating whether a setting is made so that only the members of the community can perform reading from the bulletin board.

10. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the first
10 storing means further stores, for each of the communities, information indicating whether a setting is made so that writing to the bulletin board can be performed by e-mail.

11. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the first
15 storing means further stores, for each of the communities, information of an image that has been set by an owner of the community and is to be shown on the bulletin board.

12. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the first
20 storing means further stores, for each of the communities, information relating to an entrance questionnaire to be presented to a user who wants to join the community and information relating to a withdrawal questionnaire to be presented to a user who wants to withdraw from the community.

13. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the information relating to the bulletin board that is stored in the second storing means includes at least one of a community ID for identification of the community, a message ID for identification of a message on the bulletin board, a time when the message was written, a user ID that is assigned to a user who wrote the message, and a message ID of another message that is included if the message is a reply to said another message.

14. The information processing apparatus according to claim 13, further comprising:

extracting means for searching among the information stored in the second storing means for each of the communities, for time points indicating when messages were written to the bulletin board and extracting a time point corresponding to a time when a latest message was written; and

sending means for sending an e-mail to an owner of a bulletin board having the latest message if the time point extracted by the extracting means is before a prescribed time point.

15. The information processing apparatus according to claim 13, further comprising:

extracting means for extracting, for each of the communities, an unreplied to message having no message ID of another message among the information stored in the second storing means; and

communicating means for communicating, to an owner of a bulletin board having the unreplied message, the unreplied to message itself extracted by the extracting means.

- 5 16. The information processing apparatus according to claim 13, further comprising:

extracting means for extracting, for each of the communities, an unreplied message having no message ID of another message among the information stored in the second storing means; and

- 10 communicating means for communicating, to an owner of a bulletin board having the unreplied to message, a message to the effect that the unreplied to message exists on the bulletin board.

- 15 17. The information processing apparatus according to claim 15, wherein the communicating means performs communication when instructed by the owner of the bulletin board.

18. The information processing apparatus according to claim 15, wherein the communicating means performs communication on a regular basis by e-mail.

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19. The information processing apparatus according to claim 13, wherein when a bulletin board message is exchanged with another information processing apparatus by using an e-mail, a mail address of the e-mail includes a community ID and a message ID.

20. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, further comprising a third storing means for storing at least one of a community ID for identification of a community, a user ID that is assigned to a user who uses the virtual space, a member
5 ID that is assigned to a member of the community for his identification, information indicating whether the member is allowed to exercise all or part of the authorities of an owner of the community, and information indicating one of a state that the user is currently a member of the community, a state that the user has withdrawn from the community, and a state that the user is not allowed to join the community again.

10 21. The information processing apparatus according to claim 20, wherein when information is exchanged between members by using an e-mail, a mail address of the e-mail includes a community ID and a member ID.

15 22. The information processing apparatus according to claim 20, wherein the third storing means further stores information relating to a keyword that was set by a member, the information processing apparatus further comprising:

judging means for judging, when a new message is written to a bulletin board, whether the new message includes the keyword; and

20 sending means for sending an e-mail to the member who set the keyword if the judging means judges that the new message includes the keyword.

23. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, further comprising sending means for sending a message that requests writing to the bulletin board to a

user when the user requests reading of a bulletin board, the message request being sent to users randomly at a prescribed probability rate.

24. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, further comprising:

a fourth storing means for storing points that reflect evaluations of each message on the bulletin boards by users of the virtual space; and

display control means for controlling display of each message in accordance with the number of points corresponding to the message that is stored in the fourth storing means.

25. The information processing apparatus according to claim 8, further comprising:

a fifth storing means for additively storing, for each user, points of evaluation by an owner of a related one of the bulletin boards on messages written by the user; and

display control means for controlling display of a message written by the user in accordance with the number of points of the user that is stored in the fifth storing means.

26. A community managing method for managing a plurality of communities in a virtual space, comprising the steps of:

controlling the storage of pieces of positional information of the respective communities in the virtual space;

controlling the storage of information relating to bulletin boards that are provided in the communities;

generating information relating to a newly generated community to be written to bulletin boards of nearby communities that are near the newly generated community in the virtual space; and

sending the generated information to the nearby communities.

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